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AUTHOR	Morrow, Lesley Mandel; And Others
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ABSTRACT

This brochure presents new perspectives and opportunities in family literacy. The brochure offers seven ideas as a definition of family literacy, and discusses why family literacy is important. It also discusses three areas where family literacy is taking place (studying the ways literacy is used by families, parent involvement initiatives, and intergenerational literacy initiatives). The brochure also offers 11 general guidelines that will increase the likelihood of making a family literacy program successful. The brochure concludes with a selected list of 12 organizations in 5 countries that can be contacted for further information. (RS)

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Family Literacy:

New Perspectives, New Opportunities

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A statement prepared by
the International Reading Association
Family Literacy Commission

Primary authors:
Lesley Mandel Morrow
Jeanne R. Paratore
Diane H. Tracey

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Family Literacy: A Definition

The term "family literacy" describes a complex concept that to date has not been clearly defined. The International Reading Association's Family Literacy Commission offers the following ideas as a definition of family literacy.

1. Family literacy encompasses the ways parents, children, and extended family members use literacy at home and in their community.
2. Family literacy occurs naturally during the routines of daily living and helps adults and children "get things done."
3. Examples of family literacy might include using drawings or writings to share ideas; composing notes or letters to communicate messages; keeping records; making lists; reading and following directions; or sharing stories and ideas through conversation, reading, and writing.
4. Family literacy may be initiated purposefully by a parent, or may occur spontaneously as parents and children go about the business of their daily lives.
5. Family literacy activities may also reflect the ethnic, racial, or cultural heritage of the families involved.
6. Family literacy activities may be initiated by outside institutions or agencies. These activities are often intended to support the acquisition and development of school-like literacy behaviors of parents, children, and families.
7. Family literacy activities initiated by outside agencies may include family storybook reading, completing homework assignments, or writing essays or reports.

Family Literacy: Why Is It Important?

In order to help families extend their existing uses of literacy, the Family Literacy Commission has discriminated clearly between the different purposes for and uses of literacy at home. A parent is a child's first teacher, and a child will learn from a parent for a longer period than from any other person. Because of this, parents are the most important people in a child's educational life. Research has demonstrated that parents have a strong influence on the literacy development of their children. For example, in both early childhood and high school years, children who live in homes where literacy activities regularly take place are more likely to develop greater facility with literacy activities than children who do not have regular exposure to literacy activities. Similarly, we now know that when children are read to frequently at home, when their questions about books and print are answered, when they are given access to reading and writing materials, and when they receive positive reinforcement about literacy activities, positive effects on reading and writing abilities are observed.

Literacy researchers and others concerned about improving literacy rates have increasingly become involved in programs that stress an intergenerational approach to teaching literacy skills. Children who live in families in which the adults have limited literacy skills themselves, or in homes where positive reading and writing experiences are not a part of everyday life, are especially at risk, and many educational agencies are now looking at the literacy needs of families as a whole.

Family Literacy: What Is Being Done?

The Family Literacy Commission has identified three areas where family literacy initiatives are taking place.

1. **Studying the Ways Literacy Is Used by Families**
   Researchers working on this aspect of family literacy are interested in advancing understanding of the ways in which literacy is used within families. In these studies, emphasis is placed on the richness of one's heritage and experiences rather than on perceived educational deficits. In some cases, researchers are exploring literacy events that occur naturally within diverse families. In other cases, researchers are describing the effects family literacy has on children's developing concepts about literacy. With the knowledge gained from such studies, educators can better understand the literacies that exist in diverse families and can help to make literacy instruction in school more meaningful for both parents and children.
2. **Parent Involvement Initiatives**
   Parent involvement initiatives include programs that are designed to involve and inform parents about activities that will promote their children's literacy learning in school. Such programs involve parents as agents in supporting their child's literacy development and may originate from school, the library, or other community agencies, and often are collaborative efforts between these agencies. A basic premise of parent involvement programs is that parents are both willing and committed to help their families learn literacy activities that will lead to improved school performance.
3. **Intergenerational Literacy Initiatives**
   Intergenerational literacy initiatives are specifically designed to improve the literacy development of both adults and children. These programs view parents and children as co-learners, and are generally characterized by planned and systematic instruction for both. Instruction may occur when parents and children work in either collaborative or parallel settings. The instruction for adults is intended to improve their literacy skills and at the same time teach them how to work with their children to aid their development.

Family Literacy Programs: What Makes a Program Successful?

Professionals interested in developing family literacy programs frequently ask, "How do I develop a successful program?" Since community needs vary widely, there is no single model for developing a successful family literacy program. However, the following general guidelines will increase the likelihood of success.

*Successful family literacy programs respect and understand the diversity of the families they serve.

*Successful family literacy programs build upon literacy behaviors already present in families. Although these behaviors may be different from conventional school-like literacy, all families use literacy in the routine of their daily lives. These behaviors should be identified, acknowledged, respected, preserved, and developed within family literacy programs.

*Successful family literacy programs do not try to "correct" or "fix" the family. Rather, they view intervention as a supplement to the interactions that already exist.

*Successful family literacy programs are held in accessible locations that are nonthreatening and friendly. Available transportation, child care, and refreshments at meetings contribute to creating a supportive climate.

*Successful family literacy programs follow sound educational practices appropriate for the literacy development of children and adults. Varied strategies for literacy learning are used.

*Successful family literacy programs may work with parents and children together or separately, helping families share in their learning experiences.

*Successful family literacy programs bring parents together in support groups to share experiences and learn from one another.

*Successful family literacy programs seek to improve both the quality and the range of parent-child interactions in reading and writing.

*Successful family literacy programs provide parents with ideas and materials for literacy activities in the home.

*Successful family literacy programs encourage parent input into the academic development of the children.

*Successful family literacy programs are collaborative efforts that combine the strengths of many agencies.

Family Literacy: How Can I Learn More?

The following organizations can be contacted for further information on ways to establish, administer, and evaluate family literacy programs. [Because of limited space, we are unable to provide an all-inclusive list of national and international organizations concerned with family literacy.]

Australia

Australian Reading Association
167 Lygon St.
Carlton, Victoria 3053

Parents and Literacy Learning
Queensland University of Technology
Action Group
Queensland 4059

Canada

Movement for Canadian Literacy
880 Wellington St.
Suite 500
Ottawa, Ontario K1R 6K7

National Literacy Secretariat
25 Eddy St., 11th Floor
Room 1015
Hull, Quebec K1A 1B5

New Zealand

Adult Reading and Learning Association
PO Box 12541
Wellington

United Kingdom

Family Literacy Officer
Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit
Kingsbourne House, 229
High Holborn
London WC1 7DA

United States

Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy
1002 Wisconsin Ave. NW
Washington DC 20007

Even Start Program
Compensatory Education Programs
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave. SW
Room 3043
Washington DC 20202

Intergenerational Family Literacy
Professional Network
1136 West Knox
Tucson AZ 85705

National Center for Family Literacy
Waterfront Plaza, Suite 200
325 West Main St.
Louisville KY 40202

Project Plus
PBS Project PLUS, WQED
4802 Fifth Ave.
Pittsburgh PA 15213

Reading Is Fundamental (RIF)
600 Maryland Ave. NW
Suite 500
Washington DC 20024

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Family Literacy

Families

Parents

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Children

The Family Literacy Commission of the International Reading Association is charged with conducting research and creating professional development materials in the area of family literacy.

Lesley Mandel Morrow, Chair
Pehr-Olof Rönnholm, Board Liaison
June Atkins
Caroline Beverstock
Marie C. DiBiasio
Patricia A. Edwards
Devron A. Gaber
Colin Harrison
Dolores B. Malcolm
Susan Neuman
John Daniel O'Leary
Jeanne R. Paratore
Jorie W. Philippi
Diane H. Tracey
Carol Greenwood Trejo
Alan E. Farstrup, Ex Officio
Doris Roettger, Ex Officio

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International Reading Association
800 Barksdale Road
Newark, Delaware 19714-8139, USA

Illustrations by Dave Bailey

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